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ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that the earliest years of a child's life are key to predicting ultimate success in school and life, this Texas Kids Count Project report examines early childhood education in the state, focusing on children from low-income families. The report discusses the importance of the early years of life for neurological development and the need for quality child care and early education programs, especially as the number of children with working parents increases. The report notes that about 30 percent of Texas children younger than 6 years old live in poverty and thereby face increased risks, in later years. They deserve to receive early education that will help them enter school prepared to learn. The report also describes the benefits of early child care and preschool education programs and the characteristics of quality early education. Information is provided on the availability of early childhood education, with the caution that children in low-income families are particularly at risk of receiving inadequate care. Also presented is information on the percentages of Texas 3 and 4 year olds enrolled in public prekindergarten programs for each county and for the state as a whole. Finally, the report describes the Parents as Teachers Program as a successful early parenting program that provides comprehensive services to families from the third trimester of pregnancy until children are three years of age. The report concludes with a call for greater investment in both the quantity and quality of early care and education. (Contains 33 notes.) (KB)

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ED 436 267

MEASURING UP
The State of Texas Education

A SPECIAL REPORT OF THE TEXAS KIDS COUNT PROJECT

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The earliest years of a child's life are key to predicting ultimate success in school and life. Recent research findings pointing to the importance of the first three years in brain development have serious implications for education.[1] These early learning experiences are crucial determining factors for emotional and intellectual development and will ultimately affect how well a child will perform in school.

This report focuses on the importance of quality early education for children, with an emphasis on low-income children. Children from low-income families are at greater risk of hunger, abuse and neglect, and of being exposed to little or no quality child care and early education programs. Children deserve to get off to a good start in life. Their early experiences in the home, the neighborhood, in child care, and in early education programs such as pre-kindergarten and kindergarten all affect how successful they will be later in life.

The Importance of the Early Years of Life

Neurological development is largely a result of the learning that takes place starting at birth and during the earliest years of life.[2] Scientists now believe that a young child's brain needs certain types of stimulation to develop properly. Without that stimulation, certain types of learning will not be possible when the child enters school. Likewise, with the appropriate stimulation, neural pathways are developed that can enhance a child's emotional, social, and intellectual abilities. The more these neural connections are stimulated during this early window of opportunity, the stronger they become.[3] It is so important that everyone who has contact with infants — including parents, grandparents, and caregivers — provide these children with lots of touching, loving, talking, and singing to help them develop to their full potential.

Need for Quality Child Care and Early Education Programs

The number of children with working parents is growing. Nationwide, the proportion of children under 6 years with employed mothers was 7 percent in 1940, 43 percent in 1980, and 51 percent in 1990.[4] The labor force participation rate for women between ages of 25 and 54 (who have traditionally been the primary caregivers of young children) is projected to rise to 83 percent by the year 2005.[5] This means that a growing number of children, even very young children, will be cared for by people other than their parents.

Children in single-parent families are particularly likely to spend a significant amount time in child care programs. One in four children under age 6 lives with a single mother; another 4 percent live with a single father.[6] Welfare reform, which requires mothers to work, will greatly increase the numbers of children needing child care in the future.[7] With more women entering the workforce and increasing numbers of individuals entering the workforce in welfare-to-work programs, a growing number of children spend their critical early years in day care. During these years it is especially important that children have a quality child care experience that addresses their developmental needs.[8]

Over 1.5 million Texas children (28.6%) are living in poverty according to new census statistics.[9] Young children are even more likely than other age groups to live in poverty with 30.3 percent of children less than 6 years being poor.[10] Federal poverty guidelines state that a family of three was living in poverty in 1997 if their income was $13,330 or less. Children growing up in low-income households face increased risks of:

- Hunger
- Academic failure
- Teen pregnancy
- Poor health
- Dropping out
- Exposure to violence and crime

These children deserve to receive early education that will help them enter school prepared to learn.

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Benefits of Early Child Care and Preschool Education Programs

Children exposed to positive, stimulating experiences as young children develop enhanced learning capabilities, which improve their odds for excelling in school. Children who attend preschool or other early education programs:

- have enhance cognitive, verbal, and social development, which is maintained into the first few years of school.[11]
- have significantly higher IQs[12]
- enter school better prepared to learn.[13]
- are less likely to exhibit later delinquency and antisocial behavior.[14]
- tend to demonstrate higher levels of school achievement and better social adjustment.[15]
- are less likely to have to repeat a grade or be placed in special education classes.[16]
- are more likely to graduate from high school.[17]

Clearly, there can be long-term benefits from quality early childhood education. In fact, according to one researcher, "...for many children, preschool programs can mean the difference between failing and passing, regular or special education, staying out of trouble or becoming involved in crime and delinquency, dropping out or graduating from high school."[18]

Children from impoverished environments tend to reap the most dramatic benefits from early childhood programs.[19] Early education can increase parents' and teacher's expectations of children's performance. Children growing up in poverty or near poverty face many health and environmental risks. They, in particular, need to get off to a good start in life. One way to help these children is to place them in quality early education programs.

What Constitutes Quality Early Education?

Early education programs, including child care, pre-kindergarten, and kindergarten, have an opportunity to help children develop to their full potential. Children who attend programs that meet high quality standards are more likely to provide lasting benefits.[20] For instance, children who receive warm and sensitive care are more likely to trust people, to enter school ready and eager to learn, and to get along well with other children.[21] Other factors that are predictors of good early education include:

- small group sizes,
- high teacher/child ratios
- appropriate staff wages
- trained staff
- a curriculum geared specifically to young children
- parental involvement[22]

Programs with a strong parent involvement component have been shown to improve outcomes for children in several ways: 1) Parents of children living in neighborhoods characterized by social disorganization become more empowered and better able to access resources; 2) Parents with harsh or inconsistent parenting practices are provided more effective and supportive alternatives; 3) Some programs offer other support services such as job training and counseling.[23] Providing quality early education and fostering a developmentally appropriate home environment can have long-lasting benefits for the child, the family, and the community as a whole. See the box for a description of Parents as Teachers, a model program of parental involvement in child development.

Availability of Early Childhood Education

Many children are not able to participate in early education programs because they are unavailable or too costly. Nationally, over half (52%) of 3- and 4-year-olds in high-income families were enrolled in preschool in 1993, compared to one-fourth (24%) of 3- and 4-year-olds in low-income families.[24] Families living in poverty are less likely to send their children to child care, and those that do may find that the services are barely adequate.[25] With more women entering the workforce, the need for child care is rising and the disparity in quality will become more problematic.

Several national studies on child care have found that most child care facilities are not providing the kind of quality care our children deserve.[26] According to a study of the University of Colorado, only one in seven child care centers and one in ten family child care homes nationwide posses the quality needed to enhance children's

A SUCCESS STORY: PARENTS AS TEACHERS

The Parents as Teachers Program (PAT) is an early parenting program that provides comprehensive services to families from the third trimester of pregnancy until the children are three years of age. It is designed to instill in parents the skills they need to maximize the learning potential of young children. Parents learn about child development including how to encourage language development, intellectual growth, and social and motor skills. The program also aims to improve the parent-child relationship. PAT provides these services through four types of interventions: 1) home visits by certified parent educators; 2) group meetings where parents can receive support from other parents as well as gain knowledge of developmental issues; 3) screening of children for developmental delays; and 4) referrals to community services.

Shirley Kelly, the Center Coordinator for the PAT Program located at Widen Elementary in Austin, Texas, discussed the unique aspects of an individual program. Children and parents take part in many activities including Play and Learn Times. The parents usually make something that they will take home with them to use with their children (e.g. props for storytelling, toys, puppets). The children direct their own play ("learning"). There are several stations that the children can choose from including a dramatic play station (such as a kitchen for role playing), an art station with colors or shaving cream, books, and more. Parents are given suggestions on providing a rich learning experience at home. The Widen PAT program is committed to incorporating recent neurological research findings into the curriculum. Parents are provided handouts and feedback that will help them to ensure that their children's developmental "windows of opportunity" are not missed.

The Parents as Teachers Program has been recognized nationally for its success. Working Mother magazine, the Teachers College at Columbia University, and the Partnership for Family Involvement presented PAT with the Apple P.I.E (Parent Involvement in Education) award in 1997. The Ford Foundation recognized PAT in 1997 as, "...the most widely-replicated 'Innovations' award winner over ten years." Other awards include the Charles A. Dana Award for Pioneering Achievement in Education and the Lela Rowland Award for Outstanding Achievement and Promise in Prevention Programming.

From the beginning, PAT has undertaken evaluation studies of its program to ensure the highest quality and success. The outcomes of the evaluation studies include:

- PAT children at age three were significantly more advanced than comparison children in language, problem-solving, and social development. Also, parents were more knowledgeable about child-rearing practices and child development.
- A follow-up study of the lasting effects on the children and their parents showed that PAT children scored significantly higher on standardized measures of reading and math at the end of the first grade than did comparison children. PAT children also received higher ratings from their teachers in all behavioral areas than did comparison children.
- The results of another study conducted to determine how well the program would transfer statewide indicated that children performed significantly above the national norms on measures of intellectual abilities. Furthermore, more than one-half of the children with observed developmental delays overcame them by age three. There were only two documented cases of abuse and neglect among the 400 families participating in this study over a three-year period.
- Because PAT children had significantly higher cognitive skills, language skills, social skills, and motor skills, school districts spent less money on remedial and special education.
- A study of the Texas PAT Program indicated that program participants demonstrated reduced aggression in public school settings than did comparison children. The study results suggest that this outcome was due to the parenting component that teaches non-aggressive parenting styles. These results were especially true for children living in single-parent homes.

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development.[27] Another study of the Families and Work Institute found that13 percent of regulated and 50 percent of non-regulated family child care providers offer care that is inadequate.[28]

Children in low-income families are particularly at risk of receiving inadequate care. According to the National Research Council, Institute of Medicine, "Many children living in poverty receive child care that, at best, does not support their optimal development and, at worst, may compromise their health and safety."[29] Even Head Start, which is widely acknowledged as a very successful program to help economically disadvantaged children develop social competence and readiness for school, has problems associated with large group sizes, poor teacher pay (resulting in high turnover rates), and providing classes only part of the year. There is also considerable variation in quality between different Head Start programs.[30] In Texas, Head Start served 58,608 Texas children in 1998,[31] an estimated 25 percent of children who are eligible.[32]

Similarly, public pre-kindergarten programs, available in public schools to children who are unable to speak and understand English, are disadvantaged, or homeless, only serve about two-thirds of eligible children.[33] In 1997-98, almost 122,000 children in Texas participated in public pre-kindergarten programs (18% of all 3-4 yr olds). Another 20,218 were in early education programs (geared mostly toward migrant children). The percent of children in pre-kindergarten are given for each county at the end of this report. Young children need access to high quality early education and child care programs that are suited to the particular needs of the child in order to ensure lasting developmental improvements.

Conclusions

Student's achievement in school and in life is influenced by their early educational experiences. New research findings on early brain development make it clear that quality care and early education should be vital components of every child's life. New knowledge about child development should be incorporated into early childhood curricula and parent education. Continued scientific research on brain development and early learning is needed.

Policymakers should be clear about what we expect children to be able to do when they enter school so that early education can be geared toward specific measurable goals. More coordination is needed of the full range of early childhood programs and Texas should work to ensure adequate teacher training and curriculum development. Full funding should be provided for Head Start and similar programs as well as full-day pre-kindergarten in public schools, thereby giving all children a good shot at entering school ready to learn. Children in child care should also have the opportunity to receive quality age-appropriate care.

Quality early education can produce important long-term improvements in the intellectual and social development of disadvantaged children. However, many families, but particularly low-income families, do not have access to quality child care and early education programs. Texas should invest more in both the quantity and quality of early care and education and not squander the opportunity for potential gains for children.

This report is part of a series called *Measuring Up*: The State of Texas Education produced by the Texas Kids Count Project. This and other education reports will be published both on our web site (http://www.cppp.org/kidscount) and in hard copy form. Please call or email us to request copies: (512) 320-0222 hormuth@cppp.org

Children in Public Pre-Kindergarten Programs (percent 3-4 year olds) 1997-98

County	Percent	County	Percent	County	Percent	County	Percent	County	Percent
Anderson	23.7	Crane	47.5	Hartley	0.0	Madison	24.6	San Patricio	19.9
Andrews	30.8	Crockett	20.9	Haskell	19.7	Marion	12.3	San Saba	23.8
Angelina	22.6	Crosby	48.1	Hays	23.0	Martin	11.8	Schleicher	22.4
Aransas	20.6	Culberson	37.8	Hemphill	23.2	Mason	23.7	Scurry	19.8
Archer	9.6	Dallam	46.9	Henderson	13.6	Matagorda	23.0	Shackelford	33.3
Armstrong	0.0	Dallas	15.1	Hidalgo	28.3	Maverick	20.4	Shelby	42.2
Atascosa	25.8	Dawson	23.3	Hill	32.2	McCulloch	16.5	Sherman	35.8
Austin	18.2	Deaf Smith	35.0	Hockley	33.8	McLennan	19.2	Smith	15.0
Bailey	42.5	Delta	45.3	Hood	13.4	McMullen	91.7	Somervell	43.4
Bandera	10.5	Denton	4.6	Hopkins	24.4	Medina	26.6	Starr	23.9
Bastrop	18.0	Dewitt	29.5	Houston	34.7	Menard	39.3	Stephens	18.6
Baylor	0.0	Dickens	86.3	Howard	2.6	Midland	17.7	Sterling	0.0
Bee	15.3	Dimmit	38.4	Hudspeth	0.7	Milam	23.2	Stonewall	0.0
Bell	17.5	Donley	17.6	Hunt	19.5	Mills	0.0	Sutton	16.9
Bexar	16.3	Duval	38.6	Hutchinson	20.7	Mitchell	28.9	Swisher	17.1
Blanco	11.1	Eastland	24.1	Irion	38.2	Montague	12.4	Tarrant	13.2
Borden	11.1	Ector	31.3	Jack	20.1	Montgomery	15.6	Taylor	16.6
Bosque	12.5	Edwards	16.3	Jackson	16.1	Moore	18.7	Terrell	22.2
Bowie	24.3	Ellis	16.4	Jasper	26.3	Morris	17.0	Terry	36.2
Brazoria	19.0	El Paso	20.1	Jeff Davis	10.8	Motley	76.2	Throckmorton	2.6
Brazos	16.2	Erath	22.6	Jefferson	22.5	Nacogdoches	25.6	Titus	25.8
Brewster	35.3	Falls	21.5	Jim Hogg	34.7	Navarro	18.2	Tom Green	11.7
Briscoe	22.4	Fannin	39.7	Jim Wells	17.3	Newton	35.3	Travis	16.4
Brooks	19.4	Fayette	22.5	Johnson	14.7	Nolan	25.4	Trinity	12.5
Brown	19.5	Fisher	0.0	Jones	27.4	Nueces	18.9	Tyler	17.3
Burleson	26.2	Floyd	30.2	Karnes	19.1	Ochiltree	28.8	Upshur	22.2
Burnet	25.7	Foard	0.0	Kaufman	27.8	Oldham	1.9	Upton	33.0
Caldwell	24.6	Fort Bend	13.3	Kendall	10.8	Orange	22.7	Uvalde	38.8
Calhoun	23.6	Franklin	22.0	Kenedy	100.0	Palo Pinto	20.2	Val Verde	20.6
Callahan	17.4	Freestone	6.4	Kent	0.0	Panola	12.7	Van Zandt	24.9
Cameron	26.6	Frio	27.0	Kerr	20.0	Parker	11.7	Victoria	21.4
Camp	17.8	Gaines	29.6	Kimble	0.0	Parmer	30.6	Walker	21.5
Carson	0.0	Galveston	17.5	King	0.0	Pecos	16.5	Waller	33.8
Cass	19.4	Garza	26.6	Kinney	26.1	Polk	14.1	Ward	27.2
Castro	26.5	Gillespie	27.6	Kleberg	31.8	Potter	28.6	Washington	18.1
Chambers	13.2	Glasscock	41.2	Knox	54.1	Presidio	34.8	Webb	24.1
Cherokee	20.0	Goliad	21.8	Lamar	25.8	Rains	19.9	Wharton	21.4
Childress	21.1	Gonzales	25.5	Lamb	24.6	Randall	2.7	Wheeler	32.6
Clay	3.0	Gray	20.5	Lampasas	17.1	Reagan	8.4	Wichita	17.6
Cochran	42.1	Grayson	15.1	La Salle	44.4	Real	0.0	Wilbarger	0.0
Coke	54.9	Gregg	18.3	Lavaca	10.8	Red River	43.2	Willacy	19.2
Coleman	17.9	Grimes	21.5	Lee	22.1	Reeves	18.9	Williamson	8.3
Collin	5.8	Guadalupe	19.6	Leon	16.3	Refugio	9.2	Wilson	10.6
Collingsworth	25.3	Hale	29.4	Liberty	20.8	Roberts	0.0	Winkler	24.6
Colorado	16.4	Hall	22.9	Limestone	21.9	Robertson	33.0	Wise	16.1
Comal	13.7	Hamilton	32.5	Lipscome	28.2	Rockwall	12.7	Wood	24.2
Comanche	9.6	Hansford	39.4	Live Oak	15.6	Runnels	21.4	Yoakum	35.1
Concho	24.6	Hardeman	0.0	Llano	0.0	Rusk	22.5	Young	26.1
Cooke	13.4	Hardin	16.3	Loving	0.0	Sabine	17.6	Zapata	36.4
Coryell	8.9	Harris	20.0	Lubbock	13.2	San Augustine	28.1	Zavala	33.4
Cottle	0.0	Harrison	19.6	Lynn	28.7	San Jacinto	15.0	**Texas**	**18.4**

Source: Texas Education Agency

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